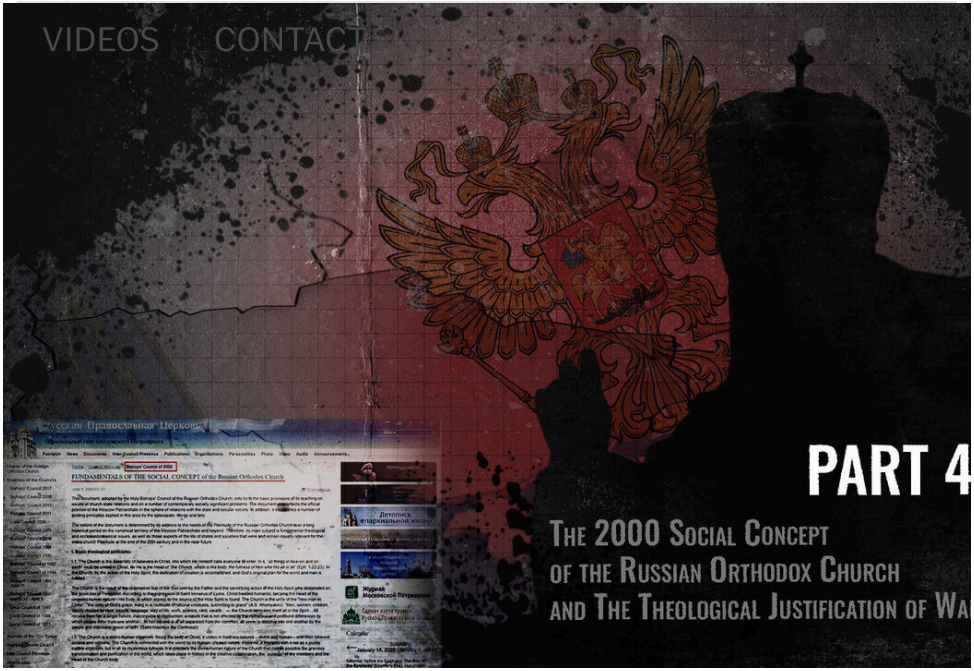

ARTICLES

The 2000 Social Concept of the Russian Orthodox Church and the Theological Justification of War. Pt.4

January 18, 2025 · 9 mins read

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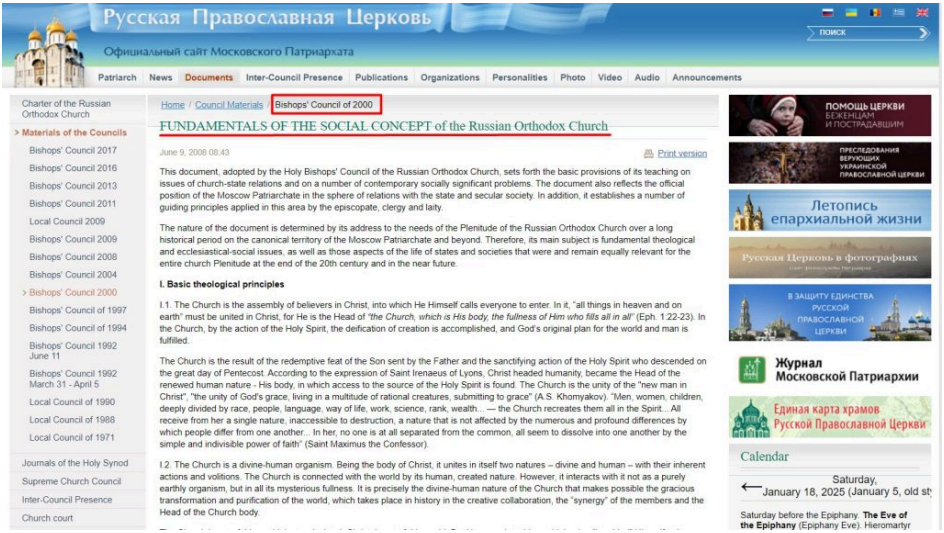
In 2000, the Bishops' Council of the Russian Orthodox Church adopted "The Basis of the Social Concept" — a document that became a significant milestone for the Church in defining its role in society. One of the key authors and ideologists of this text was the then-Metropolitan of Smolensk and Kaliningrad, Chairman of the Department for External Church Relations, and now Patriarch Kirill (Vladimir Gundyaev).

Many theologians at the time viewed the emergence of such a document positively, seeing it as an attempt to deepen social reflection within Orthodoxy. However, the text itself provoked mixed reactions. The style, characteristic of documents drafted under the leadership of Patriarch Kirill, was marked by contradictions, lyrical digressions, and a lack of critical analysis of the Church's past experiences in its interactions with society and the state.

This manner of presentation made the document difficult to interpret. Many topics were addressed inconsistently, creating an impression of a certain disarray. As a result, it proved challenging to establish a clear position on many of the issues raised in the document.

The most contentious and contradictory section, in our view, is Chapter VIII, “War and Peace.” Written 20 years before Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine, it seemed to foretell the arrival of these terrifying times, when it would become necessary to support and justify war and convince the population that an armed attack on a neighboring state is not an act of conquest but one of liberation. Just as a fruit ripens slowly, so too in matters of mass persuasion: first, the idea must be implanted, the ideological foundation laid, and then it must be consistently reinforced and given the status of an axiom.

It is remarkable that even today, many consider the ROC’s “Basis of the Social Concept” a potential foundation for forming an antiwar stance within the Russian Orthodox Church, one entirely opposed to the current position of supporting Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, as publicly voiced by Patriarch Kirill.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FUNDAMENTALS OF THE SOCIAL CONCEPT of the Russian Orthodox Church
June 9, 2008 08:43
Print version
This document, adopted by the Holy Bishops' Council of the Russian Orthodox Church, sets forth the basic provisions of its teaching on issues of church-state relations and on a number of contemporary socially significant problems. The document also reflects the official position of the Moscow Patriarchate in the sphere of relations with the state and secular society. In addition, it establishes a number of guiding principles applied in this area by the episcopate, clergy and laity.
The nature of the document is determined by its address to the needs of the Plenitude of the Russian Orthodox Church over a long historical period on the canonical territory of the Moscow Patriarchate and beyond. Therefore, its main subject is fundamental theological and ecclesiastical-social issues, as well as those aspects of the life of states and societies that were and remain equally relevant for the entire church Plenitude at the end of the 20th century and in the near future.
I. Basic theological principles
I.1. The Church is the assembly of believers in Christ, into which He Himself calls everyone to enter. In it, "all things in heaven and on earth" must be united in Christ, for He is the Head of "the Church, which is His body, the fullness of Him who fills all in all" (Eph. 1.22-23). In the Church, by the action of the Holy Spirit, the deification of creation is accomplished, and God's original plan for the world and man is fulfilled.
The Church is the result of the redemptive feat of the Son sent by the Father and the sanctifying action of the Holy Spirit who descended on the great day of Pentecost. According to the expression of Saint Irenaeus of Lyons, Christ headed humanity, became the Head of the renewed human nature - His body, in which access to the source of the Holy Spirit is found. The Church is the unity of the "new man in Christ", "the unity of God's grace, living in a multitude of rational creatures, submitting to grace" (A.S. Khomyakov). "Men, women, children, deeply divided by race, people, language, way of life, work, science, rank, wealth... — the Church recreates them all in the Spirit... All receive from her a single nature, inaccessible to destruction, a nature that is not affected by the numerous and profound differences by which people differ from one another... In her, no one is at all separated from the common, all seem to dissolve into one another by the simple and indivisible power of faith" (Saint Maximus the Confessor).
I.2. The Church is a divine-human organism. Being the body of Christ, it unites in itself two natures – divine and human – with their inherent actions and volitions. The Church is connected with the world by its human, created nature. However, it interacts with it not as a purely earthly organism, but in all its mysterious fullness. It is precisely the divine-human nature of the Church that makes possible the gracious transformation and purification of the world, which takes place in history in the creative collaboration, the "synergy" of the members and the Head of the Church body.
ПОМОЩЬ ЦЕРКВИ БЕЖЕНЦАМ И ПОСТРАДАВШИМ
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Saturday before the Epiphany. The Eve of the Epiphany (Epiphany Eve). Hieromartyr

Screenshots from patriarchia.ru website [1]

War and Peace

The most contentious and contradictory section, in our view, is Chapter VIII, "War and Peace." Written 20 years before Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, it seemed to foretell the arrival of these terrifying times, when it would become necessary to support and justify war and convince the population that an armed attack on a neighboring state is not an act of conquest but one of liberation. Just as a fruit ripens slowly, so too in matters of mass persuasion: first, the idea must be implanted, the ideological foundation laid, and then it must be consistently reinforced and given the status of an axiom.

It is remarkable that even today, many consider the ROC's "Basis of the Social Concept" a potential foundation for forming an antiwar stance within the Russian Orthodox Church, one entirely opposed to the current position of supporting Russia's invasion of Ukraine, as publicly voiced by Patriarch Kirill.

Indeed, at first glance, the text of the "Basis" contains theological reflections on war (Chapter VIII, "War and Peace"), as well as references in other parts of the document that can be interpreted as a call for an antiwar approach and a commitment to peacemaking efforts.

For example, war is explicitly called an evil (VIII. §1), and the Russian Orthodox Church assumes rather strict obligations regarding peacemaking and opposing war propaganda and violence:

"The Russian Orthodox Church seeks to carry out peacemaking service both on a national and international scale, striving to resolve various conflicts and bring peoples, ethnic groups, governments, and political forces to reconciliation. To this end, it addresses its message to those in power and other influential segments of society, while also making efforts to organize negotiations between opposing sides and to provide assistance to those who suffer. The

Church also opposes war propaganda and violence, as well as various manifestations of hatred that could provoke fratricidal clashes." (VIII. §5)

At the same time, the document's stance on war is ambiguous and ranges from categorical condemnation to open support, depending on the nature of the war. "The Basis of the Social Concept" identifies six types of war:

1. civil war,
2. aggressive external war,
3. interethnic conflict,
4. just war,
5. war not meeting the principles of justice,
6. liberation war.

For instance, when it comes to civil or aggressive external wars, the Russian Orthodox Church, Moscow Patriarchate, categorically forbids clergy and church structures from cooperating with the state or assisting in the conduct of such wars (III. §8.b):

"There are areas in which the clergy and canonical church structures cannot support the state or cooperate with it. They are as follows:

1. *b) waging civil war or aggressive external war."*

At first glance, this is precisely the position that the Russian Orthodox Church and its clergy should adhere to in the context of the Russian Federation's invasion of independent Ukraine. If Ukrainians are considered one people with Russians, this war can be classified as civil and fratricidal. If Ukraine is regarded as an independent state, then the invasion constitutes an aggressive external war.

Loopholes for Justifying War

However, "The Basis of the Social Concept" by the Moscow Patriarchate in a remarkable way leaves loopholes for justifying and supporting war by its leadership. First,

"While recognising war as evil, the Church does not prohibit her children from participating in hostilities if at stake is the security of their neighbours and the restoration of trampled justice. Then war is considered to be necessary though undesirable but means. (VIII. §2)."

Second, "In the present system of international relations, it is sometimes difficult to distinguish an aggressive war from a defensive war. " (VIII. §3).

Third, "The Basis of the Social Concept of the Russian Orthodox Church" presents **the idea of "just war,"** permissible

only under certain conditions: love of one's neighbours, people and Fatherland; understanding of the needs of other nations; conviction that it is impossible to serve one's country by immoral means. Among obvious signs pointing to the equity or inequity of a warring party are its war methods and attitude towards its war prisoners and the civilians of the opposite side, especially children, women and elderly." (VIII. §3).

If a war represents an interethnic conflict, ROC declares its neutral position: "The Orthodox Church carries out the mission of reconciliation between hostile nations and their representatives. Thus, in inter-ethnic conflicts, she does not identify herself with any side. (II. §4)". However, in the case "when one of the sides commit evident aggression or injustice," the Church is obligated to support those forced to defend themselves (II.§4).

At first glance, the concept of a "just war" should not have justified the Russian Orthodox Church leadership's support for the invasion of Ukraine. After the events in Bucha, Irpin, Kherson, the mass shelling of Ukrainian cities, the destruction of civilian infrastructure, the inhumane treatment in filtration camps, and the blatant propaganda of hatred toward Ukrainians in the media, it is evident that the Russian army does not meet the criteria of "moral standards" outlined in the document. The methods of conducting war as well as the

treatment of prisoners and the civilian population, clearly contradict the ideals declared by the Church.

However, if the Russian invasion is interpreted as a "liberation war," then the "Basis of the Social Concept of the Russian Orthodox Church does not need even formal criteria of justice for such a war. On the contrary, it is explicitly blessed: "The Russian Church on many occasions gave her blessing to the people for them to take part in liberation wars (II. §2)" **Here, it is no longer described as a "forced measure" but as a sacred duty.** "If you avoid dying for the honour and freedom of the Fatherland, you will die a criminal or a slave; die for the faith and the Fatherland and you will be granted life and a crown in heaven," states the Moscow Patriarchate referencing St. Philaret (of Moscow) (II. §2).

As for soldiers who "protect the life and security of their neighbours," they are regarded **almost as saints**. To justify this, the document cites the apocryphal words of St. Cyril, Equal-to-the-Apostles and Enlightener of the Slavs:

"Our Christ-loving soldiers protect our Holy Church with arms in their hands. They safeguard the sovereign in whose sacred person they respect the image of the rule of the Heavenly King. They safeguard their land because with its fall the home authority will inevitably fall too and the evangelical faith will be

shaken. These are precious pledges for which soldiers should fight to the last. And if they give their lives in battlefield, the Church will include them in the community of the holy martyrs and call them intercessors before God».” (VIII. §2).

Thus, within the framework of church tradition, soldiers who fall on the battlefield in defense of the Church and the leader of the state can be perceived as holy martyrs. In this context, the much-publicized statement of Patriarch Kirill of Moscow he made on September 25, 2022, in his sermon at the Liturgy at the Alexander Nevsky Skete, looks quite logical given this concept. The Patriarch stated that:

“The Church understands that if someone, driven by a sense of duty and the necessity to fulfill their oath, remains faithful to their calling and dies in the performance of their military duty, then they undoubtedly perform an act equivalent to a sacrifice. They offer themselves as a sacrifice for others. And therefore, we believe that this sacrifice washes away all the sins a person has committed.”

This statement by Patriarch Kirill is not his personal innovation but a logical result of the provisions of the “Basis of the Social Concept of the Russian Orthodox Church.” Moreover, his wording about the “washing away of sins” may seem mild compared to his other expressions, where fallen soldiers are

straightforwardly called “holy martyrs” and “intercessors before God.”

Furthermore, in the same sermon, Kirill (Gundyaev) **proposed equating the sacrifice of soldiers with the salvific sacrifice of Christ Himself** “for the world” (John 3:16):

“God, in His Son, gives His human life for other people, for the human race, meaning that self-sacrifice is the highest manifestation of a person’s love for their neighbors. Self-sacrifice is the greatest expression of the best human qualities. We know that today many are dying on the fields of fratricidal strife.”

These assertions are grounded in the provisions of the ROC’s Social Concept, which references Christ’s words about love and sacrifice: “Greater love hath no man but this, that a man lay down his life for his friends” (John 15:13). Within the framework of the concept, this commandment is interpreted specifically in relation to soldiers and no one else (VIII. §2). Moreover, in the section “The Church and the Nation,” **patriotism is described as one of the ways of fulfilling God’s commandment of love to one’s neighbour** (II. §3). This patriotism, above all, is manifested when an Orthodox Christian defends his fatherland against an enemy (II. §3).

Patriarch Kirill perceives Russia's military aggression against Ukraine as a "liberation war" of Holy Rus', directed against enemies — "foreign tongues thirsting for enmity" — that threaten it (Prayer "For the Restoration of Peace," March 3, 2022).

For him, this is a "liberation war" against a powerful world seeking to impose gay parades (sermon on Cheesefare Sunday after the Liturgy at the Cathedral of Christ the Saviour, March 6, 2022). He views the conflict as a defense against the occupation of Russian lands, which threatens its spiritual existence and could bring "spiritual destruction, altering the foundations of religious and cultural identity," (sermon on the commemoration day of the Blessed Grand Prince Alexander Nevsky, December 6, 2022). This is also a "liberation war" against the West, which, in his view, seeks to seize "our souls, our minds, our political will," encroaching on "spiritual sovereignty, faith, traditions, and the spiritual foundations of personal and social life" (ibid.).

Furthermore, he sees this conflict as a "struggle that has not a physical but a metaphysical significance" (sermon on Cheesefare Sunday after the Liturgy at the Cathedral of Christ the Savior, March 6, 2022). In this struggle, the enemies are those who destroy God's law and "erase the boundary between

holiness and sin," as well as those who promote sin as a norm or model of behavior (ibid.).

Vladimir Gundyaev, Patriarch Kirill. Screenshots from theguardian.com website

Conclusion

Our previous three parts have discussed the Russian Orthodox Church, Moscow Patriarchate, as an organization closely linked in the Soviet past to the USSR State Security Committee (KGB). We recommend reading Part 1, Part 2, and Part 3.

We can view the Social Concept of the Russian Orthodox Church from the year 2000 simply as the position of the church hierarchy and stop at that. However, we can view it as an ideological foundation embedded into the mentality of an

entire nation. A foundation that was given time to mature so that the population would accept anti-evangelical dogmas more naturally. In any case, Patriarch Kirill cannot but bless the current war, because he already justified it 20 years ago.

Source:

1. https://web.archive.org/web/20250118161135/http://www.patr

Holy War KGB Moscow Patriarchate Patriarch Kirill Russian Orthodox Church Vladimir Gundyaev

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